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AUTHOR Parris, P. B.
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ABSTRACT

Pointing out the relationship between the writing process and business communications should help business students understand the necessity of communicating clearly and efficiently. Students should first learn that adequate preparation before using non-print communications devices--such as telephones--is as necessary as prewriting is before writing. Students should then learn (1) how the writing process works; (2) about the creative process model of psychologist Graham Wallas, which includes the steps of preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification; and (3) how the creative process fits into the writing process. Lists and no-fault writing may be used to gather necessary data for the following questions: What is happening? Who is involved? When? Where? What? and Why? Business writers need to prepare themselves in order to make effective use of communications technologies and to take full advantage of the power of language to make things happen and to get work done. (EL)

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Pre-Writing and Business Communications

P. B. Parris
Department of English
Drake University
Des Moines, Iowa 50311

Delivered at CCCC, New Orleans, March, 1986

The old saw was never more true: Time is money. Time, that constantly evaporating, non-renewable resource, is what companies buy from their employees. Those who use it efficiently earn their salaries and make money for their firms. Those who don't, who waste their time and that of others, are a liability. Every communication that fails to get its message across means dollars lost. Business periodicals perennially calculate and decry the expense of the traditional secretary-typed letter--fast becoming as rare as a dodo's egg--to document the out-of-pocket cost of ineffective writing. Today's and tomorrow's newer, more sophisticated means of communication provide even more costly ways to waste time and money. We may not be efficiency experts who are able to teach our students to work faster, but we can teach them to work smarter, to be

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aware of the writing process and to be in control of their own variations thereof.

In a recent issue of the The Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication, the editor asked, in effect, what the writing process has to do with business communications.[1] In this paper, I intend to try to answer that question and to suggest some ways that we, as teachers of business writing, can make that connection clear to our students in order that they become better-prepared, more cost-effective communicators. But first, I want to look more closely at some non-print business communications media our students need to know about and the economics involved in their use.

The telephone is the leading non-print communications medium for business. One of the newer ways to waste time and money on the telephone is the automatic answering machine, which makes it possible to play almost endless games of telephone tag. The first party calls and gets a recorded message that the second party is out. After the beep, First tells Second to call him. Later, Second calls First, gets a recorded message that he's out. Second then leaves a message to call her, and so on. No real communication takes place here, just a fruitless exercise in gamesmanship, two non-communicators wasting time and money. The prepared caller who finds the other person out leaves a short message on the machine, containing the specific

information the other needs.

Just recently announced is a new telephone service--XVMX, Xerox Voice Message Exchange, a sort of super answering machine/party line arrangement. This telephone bulletin board is just another high-tech way to waste time and money if users don't anticipate what they're going to say before getting on the line.

Even telephone calls that go through and reach the intended party are costly if they take longer than they need to because the original caller was unprepared. Such calls waste not one but two persons' time. In the case of conference calls, the poor communicator can multiply the loss by a factor of three, four, or even more, depending upon the number of people involved. With Anderson in Seattle, Baxter in Chicago, Caldwell in New York, and Daniels in L.A., and all with their executive meters ticking, the unprepared participant can run up a sizeable corporate bill for lost time.

Another growing use of the telephone in large companies is for dictating to a word-processing center. The writer calls a number from any touch-tone telephone, night or day, and speaks onto a tape which is later transcribed and the document delivered to the writer. Halpern and Liggett have written at length about the necessity of teaching students to deal with this innovation in business writing, where time and money are wasted when the writer is unprepared to

dictate or does so in a way that produces an unusable document.[2]

Our students need to be made aware that every telephone call they make is a communications act for which they must be prepared. The pricey business periodical Executive Productivity suggests to its readers, "Compile a list of key points for every call before you dial, and check them off as you go. When you've checked the last item, you'll know it's time to hang up."[3] Anyone who teaches writing as a process recognizes the advice as not only practical but theoretically sound. We also recognize that the advice doesn't go far enough.

The telephone isn't the only means for business writers to waste time and money. Electronic mail via computers and even the traditional hardcopy letters and memos, whether produced by computer or conventional typewriter, can fail to say what needs saying the first time and require expensive clarification. The problem begins to suggest its own solution--the necessity for adequate preparation before communicating, the need for pre-writing before writing.

I have found it useful to share in some detail with my business writing students how the writing process works. Right from the first day of class, I provide background on, first, the creative process and, then, the writing process so that they can begin to understand the psychological and well as the practical necessities for pre-writing all

business communications.

Writing in business and the professions engages the imagination and is a creative undertaking.[4] The four-stage model of the creative process I present is that of psychologist Graham Wallas, first published sixty years ago,[5] and validated again and again by subsequent research. Any successful creative task begins not with a flash of inspiration but with some kind of conscious preparation, followed by a period of incubation, during which the mind at some level below consciousness is working on the material fed to it at the first stage, organizing it, making useful connections. Sometime during this short vacation from the task, an illumination--some insight concerning the creative problem the mind has been working on--may surface into consciousness. Or the writer may pull the ideas up by beginning to work on the two steps of verification : first, freely writing the draft and, second and separately, looking critically at what has been produced.

The class and I then move on to fitting the creative process into the writing process: pre-writing, writing, and post-writing. Pre-writing corresponds to the preparation stage where data for the communication is brought together before the first draft is freely written. The writing stage--the first and subsequent drafts--is for production of the text and getting the meaning clear.

Post-writing involves editing for correctness and proof-reading.

As a means for quickly generating text, I introduce my students to a variation on Macrorie's free writing that I call no-fault writing--it sounds more business-like--and, as an additional aid to flexible pre-writing planning, I suggest list-making. Next, I explain how to use lists and no-fault writing for gathering the necessary raw material at the pre-writing stage for specific communications tasks by directing the search with questions derived from Burke's Pentad.

Just as Kenneth Burke said of literature and William Irmscher has suggested of all the world,[6] one way to look at any situation is to think of it as a drama on a stage; the same is true in business. The five elements of the Pentad are always present. In order to gather all the necessary data for a communication--written or oral--the writer needs to answer quickly, using no-fault writing or simply listing words and phrases, the questions related to each element:

Act: What's happening? (happened? will happen?)
Actor(s): Who's involved?
Scene: When and where?
Means: What things are involved?
Purpose: Why? (to all of the above)

Students are made aware that time spent jotting down information at the pre-writing stage can save costly errors or time-consuming delays later on and are urged to employ the discovery questions in doing all the exercises and assignments for the class so that use of the questions becomes automatic. I also make it clear that, except for the most impromptu, the same pre-writing activity needs to be done before all business communications--phone calls, conference calls, staff meetings, sales presentations, whatever.

Current indications are that most of our students will be doing the bulk of their communicating in the future from a computer terminal. For that reason, I have also adapted the Pentad for pre-writing invention for computer use without special software.[7] Using whatever word-processing program is available to them, students can do their pre-writing, writing, and post-writing quickly and efficiently, just as they will be expected to be able to do at any job site.

On the job, the writing process may be highly compressed, but it nevertheless underlies business communication just as it does the kinds of writing taught in composition classes where the process has been most frequently studied. Although there may, for example, be time for only one draft of a memo, the writer must take

enough of that time with the pre-writing to insure that the single draft contains, without ambiguity, the information it is intended to convey. The incubation time may consist only of the few minutes the writer can take to get a fresh cup of coffee, but cooperating with the psychological processes involved in writing will pay dividends.

In business, the power of language takes on economic considerations. We must make our students aware that when time is money, writers need to prepare themselves in order to make cost-effective use of communications technologies and to take full advantage of the power of language to make things happen and to get work done.

Notes

1. XLVII, No. 4 (Dec 1985): 2.
2. Computers and Composing: How the New Technologies are Changing Writing (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1984).
3. Quoted in Bottom Line, 6, No. 14 (Jul 30 1985): 1.
4. See Russell Rutter's "Poetry, Imagination, and Technical Writing," College English, 47, No. 7 (Nov 1985): 698-712.
5. The Art of Thought (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1926).
6. William F. Irmscher The Holt Guide to English (New York:

Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972) 28-35.

7. For more details, see "Pre-Writing Invention Without Special Software," Computers and Composition, 2, No. 2 (Feb 1985): 1-2, or I will gladly share the computer modification of the Pentad and the handouts I've devised to teach students to use it with anyone who sends a self-addressed business envelope.

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